

September 9, 1966

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Professor Lawrence Cranberg  
Department of Physics  
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Charlottesville, Virginia 22903

Dear Professor Cranberg:

Thank you for your comment on my column on "Icarus".

After seeing this column in print I shared some of the same sense of incompleteness that is reflected in your letter, and if I had time and space I might already have enlarged somewhat in the direction you indicated. There are certainly great difficulties in the institutions for which scientists are inadequately prepared, and I would say this quite apart from any question of fault. Wherever the fault is, certainly we ought to be doing a better job in the actual circumstances that now prevail in the communication of scientific information, and as scientists we have plenty of resources that we do not fully use for this purpose. This, after all, is exactly the motive that underlies my own interest in the column itself, and it is rather remarkable that there are not many more precedents for this kind of commitment.

Dr. Butler's gullibility and self-exoneration are not, however, what I would regard to be the central issue of this particular column. Rather, it is the frivolity with which a question about the possible survival of the earth was treated in the press. Dr. Butler is not the kind of authority that would make a news story out of "what he said"; if there was a legitimate story it would have to be in the credibility of the assertions that there really was a significant hazard to the earth in the orbit of Icarus. If the sentences I have underlined did not receive the stress they deserved in your reading, then my own style is perhaps at fault.

I do realize, however, that this response is not completely in the spirit of the very constructive remarks you make and with which I do of course fundamentally agree. Perhaps the best suggestion I can offer is that you take the occasion to communicate your remarks directly to the editor of the Post for publication as a letter. Besides serving as an avenue for your very legitimate criticism and amplification, such exchanges also help in what is, I hope, the constructive purpose of attracting more general interest to the social confrontations of science.

Cordially,

Joshua Lederberg  
Professor of Genetics